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SFMD Introduces New Fire Chaplain

When people dial 911, they expect their fire department to respond rapidly, employ expert tactics to extinguish fires, rescue trapped victims, and salvage personal belongings. They expect their Paramedics and EMT's to provide emergency medical care for victims who are critically ill and injured. Fire Officers routinely assess and mitigate hazardous situations and perform carefully planned and executed rescues of those requiring technical expertise. Now the fire district is also prepared to provide a greater level of emotional and spiritual care to the family and friends of those affected by the emergencies to which we respond by offering the help and compassionate care of a Fire Chaplain.

At their March Fire Board Meeting, Fire Chief Paul Bourgeois introduced Superstition Fire & Medical District's new Fire Chaplain, the Reverend Thomas J. Doubt. Tom and his wife of 35 years, Kathie, had been visiting to Arizona for the past 8 years, and in September 2014 they moved to Mesa to be year-round residents. Tom has served as the pastor of churches in Maryland and Virginia for the past 20 years. He volunteered as the Fire Chaplain for New Kent County, Virginia for the past nine years, where he was also an EMS provider. During his time as a Fire Chaplain, Tom has also served as a member of a Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team for the EMS region around Richmond.

"Our people, like police and military personnel, are exposed to many troubling situations during their work days - from having people die within their arms as they are trying to save them, to helping parents cope with a child's untimely death, and the list could go on," said SFMD Fire Chief Paul Bourgeois. "Our firefighters know what to do to help people get out of danger and can help them begin healing physically, but are ill-prepared to help them holistically on an emotional or spiritual level," continued Bourgeois.

Emergency responders are not trained or equipped to provide the level of holistic care called for in most situations. Rendering care to the patient becomes second nature to most Fire and EMS personnel, but transitioning from the role of rescuer to the role of counselor to the family exceeds our capabilities. In many cases, fire and EMS workers become hardened to what we see, and feel that if they allow themselves to become emotionally involved, they leave themselves open, vulnerable, and most likely unable to handle the next incident that waits just around the corner. Chief Bourgeois noted that, "We sometimes have to be able to disengage from the emotional events of an incident, so that we will be able to continue serving the next sick or injured person on the very next call."

"A fire service chaplain is uniquely qualified to fill the role of helping facilitate the long-term healing process for the family members of injured or acutely ill patients, fire victims, firefighters and their families, and the community itself," said Bourgeois.

According to the Federation of Fire Chaplains, today's trained chaplain provides an effective solution to the intentional and purposeful provision of holistic care to department members, their families, as well as on-scene support for community residents during and after an incident. Beginning with a calling to serve those within the fire service and their local community, fire chaplains are trained in fire department culture and operations, pastoral care, crisis intervention, comprehensive CISM, and grief support, making them uniquely suited to meet additional needs beyond the general scope of what first responders are able to provide.

Reverend Doubt has a Ph.D. from Temple University School of Medicine, and a Masters in Divinity from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He served as a Navy corpsman, including a tour in Vietnam with the Marines. He worked for the Navy for 13 years as a civilian diving medical officer for fleet divers and special operations forces. Tom then worked 3 years for the National Institutes of Health, directing national research programs in cardiovascular medicine. He took an early retirement from the Federal Government in 1995 to go into the ministry full-time. Tom & Kathie have a daughter, son-in-law, and two adorable grand-children that live in Phoenix.

If you would like to know more about the SFMD, please visit our web site at www.sfmd.az.gov, or call our offices at 480-982-4440.

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